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The Cast-away

The Cast-away

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WILLIAM COWPER

The Cast-away

The Text of the Original Manuscript
and the First Printing
of Cowper's Latin Translation

EDITED BY CHARLES RYSKAMP



Princeton, New Jersey
Princeton University Library
1963

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Robert H. Taylor*

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I L L U S T R A T I O N S

*All are taken from the Hannay Collection,
Princeton University Library*

PLATES I-II "The Cast-away," March 20, 1799. (Actual size.)

PLATES III-V Latin translation of "The Cast-away," *ca.* August 26, 1799. (Actual size.)

PLATE VI William Cowper. Engraving by Francesco Bartolozzi, 1799 (?), from a sketch by Thomas Lawrence, 1793. (Plate size 8 x 11 inches.) The engraving was "for private use only," and not many impressions were taken (cf. Ryskamp, "Lawrence's Portrait of Cowper," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, xx [1959], 140-144). One of four impressions in the Princeton University Library, three of which are in the Hannay Collection.

PLATE VII Silhouette in ink of Cowper, 1791 (?). (Actual size.) Original, "on black paper from a Shade," taken by John Higgins (1768-1846, a friend of Cowper, and later a squire of Weston Underwood, where Cowper lived 1786-1795), with the help of Lady Hesketh, Cowper's cousin, and Samuel Roberts (d. 1832), Cowper's servant (cf. *Letters of Lady Hesketh to the Rev. John Johnson*, London, 1901, p. 106). Apparently, reduced copies were made by James Andrews (d. 1817), the Olney painter and sculptor, who in the spring of 1780 had given Cowper drawing lessons. (A silhouette by Andrews is in the Cowper Museum, Olney, Buckinghamshire; reproduced in Thomas Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, London, 1892, facing p. 546.) "Those of Cowper's admirers who possess a *silhouette* of him in which a slice has evidently been scraped away from the back of his wig, may care to be told that the very striking likeness in question was obtained by reducing a shadow of the poet's profile made by Mr. Higgins in 1791,—with which Lady Hesketh would not be content until 'a trifle' more than the shadow justified had been taken off. The flatness of the back of Cowper's head was even extraordinary." Reported by Higgins to John William Burgon, *Lives of Twelve Good Men*, London, 1888, II,

352. The silhouette was first reproduced (very poorly) in *Public Characters of 1799-1800*, London, 1799.

PLATE VIII The house on the principal street of East Dereham, Norfolk, facing the market place, where Cowper wrote "The Cast-away," and where he died, on April 25, 1800. The middle window on the right was, according to reports, that of Cowper's bedroom. Drawing by Elizabeth Turner of Yarmouth, *ca.* 1820 (?); presented to William Upcott. (Actual size.) From Upcott's extra-illustrated set of Cowperiana, Volume IV, facing page 187. Elizabeth Turner was the second daughter of Dawson Turner, the celebrated botanist and collector of autographs; in 1823 she married Francis Palgrave (later Sir Francis, the historian). She was the mother of Francis Turner Palgrave, well-known for his anthology, *The Golden Treasury*.

The Cast-away

FOR most students of eighteenth-century English poetry "The Cast-away" is William Cowper's supreme lyric and one of the most remarkable poems of the age. It is, as Sir Herbert Grierson and J. C. Smith wrote, "a unique combination of the reserve and formality of the best eighteenth-century lyric with passionate feeling, of Cowper's courtesy with Cowper's despair." The stanzas appear at first to have been created for a hymn tune. Cowper had written many hymns, but these verses will not be sung in a church. This is a poem of "despair of life"—"of friends, of hope, of all bereft." Consequently there are some readers who look upon "The Cast-away" as Cowper's most ironic verse. To write a poem about being cast off from man and God in a form like that of a hymn: this is the ultimate irony. Or one may say with Dr. Leavis that the mode does not completely fit the purpose; that its "declamatory decorum and its precise and patterned rationality" give a sense of discrepancy between Cowper's emotion and the "critical balance of the statement." Or one may look upon "The Cast-away" as a poem in which the strict and simple form and the simple story of the lost sailor produce an almost unbearable tension as they hold the pathos and the despair without ever flowing over into sentiment or violence.

One time a voice had said to Cowper in a dream, "It is all over with thee; thou hast perished." He believed that the voice represented the will of God. During the last twenty-seven years of his life he frequently lived with that "fatal dream," "before the recollection of which," he wrote, "all consolation vanishes, and, it seems to me, must always vanish." Even before that, in his earliest poetry, he reveals the powerful note of personal tragedy that culminates in "The Cast-away." Abandonment and desolation are again and again his theme. The image of the castaway is the most persistent metaphor in Cowper's work. It is

one which he made a part of himself and the symbol of his life and poetry. It is coupled with wild pictures of storms—which fascinated and horrified him—and the sea, but the castaway always predominates.

Cowper's idea of the castaway must have come originally from the Authorized Version of the Bible. There it is used just once, by St. Paul in the ninth chapter of I Corinthians: "And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." The image in Cowper's Olney Hymn Number 36 (1771-1772) is most certainly derived from St. Paul:

Did I meet no trials here,
No chastisement by the way;
Might I not, with reason, fear
I should prove a cast-away?

But the image may be found (if somewhat transformed) twenty years earlier, in the poem possibly his in *The Student* (1750), "A Reflection on the Year 1720," and in the terrible lines which begin "Doom'd as I am in solitude to waste" (1757):

See me—ere yet my destin'd course half done,
Cast forth a wand'rer on a wild unknown!
See me neglected on the world's rude coast,
Each dear companion of my voyage lost!

Similar images occur in "Mortals! around your destin'd heads" and "Hope, like the short-liv'd ray that gleams awhile," both of which were presumably written between 1752 and 1757. Later the castaway theme continues in "Heu! Quam Remotus" (1774),

Et fluctuosum ceu mare volvitur,
Dum commovebar mille timoribus,

The Cast-away.

Mar. 20. 1799.

Obscurest night involved the sky,
Th' Atlantic billows roared,
When such a destitute wretch as I
Washed headlong from on board
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home for ever left.

No braver Chief could Albion boast
Than He with whom he went,
Nor ever ship left Albion's coast
With warmer wishes sent,
He loved them both, but both in vain,
Nor Him beheld, nor Her again.

Not long beneath thewhelming brine
Expert to swim, he lay,
Nor soon he felt his strength decline
Or courage die away;
But waged with Death a lasting strife
Supported by despair of life.

He shouted, nor his friends had failed
To check the vessels' course,
But so the furious blast prevailed
That, pitiless perforce,
They left their outcast mate behind,
And scudded still before the wind.

Some succour yet they could afford,
And, such as storms allow,
The cask, the coop, the floated cord
Delay'd not to bestow;
But He, they knew, nor ship nor shore,
Whatever they gave, should visit more.

nor, cruel as it seem'd, could He
Their haste, himself, condemn,
Aware that flight in such a sea
alone could rescue them;
Yet bitter felt it still to ~~deserted~~ die
Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

He long survives who lives an hour
In ocean, self-upheld,
And so long he with unspent power
His destiny repell'd,
And ever, as the minutes flew,
Entreated help, or cried, adieu!

At length, his transient respite past,
His comrades, who before
Had heard his voice in every blast,
Could catch the sound no more;
For then, by toil subdued, he drank
The stifling wave, and then he sank.

No poet wept him, but the page
Of narrative sincere
That tells his name, his worth, his age,
Is wet with Anson's tear,
And tears by bards or heroes shed
Alike immortalize the Dead.

I, therefore, purpose not to dream,
Descanting on his fate,
To give the melancholy theme
A more enduring date,
But misery still delights to trace
Its semblance in another's case.

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
No light propitious shone,
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
We perish'd, each, alone;
But I, beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he.

Mat. 25.

Totum velabat nox obscurissima cælum,
~~Itaque~~ Et mare atlanteum dira ciebat hyems,
 Cum miser in medios excussus navita fluctus
 (Sorte quidem tristi, sed leviore meâ)
 Spem reditûs horæ momento perdidit omnem,
 Privatus sociis, veliferâq; domo.

Nunquam ex Angliacis solvit dux fortior oris
 Quàm cui se socium junxerat ille lubens;
 hec votis unquam misère in bella carinam
 Pluribus Anglige, sollicitive magis;
 Ille ducemq; suam et navem dilexit, at illi
 Neutrum oculis ~~fortis~~ ^{ultra} cernere posse datum est.

At non vesantis sub fluctibus, arte natandi
 Instructus, longum defuit ille sibi;
 nec ~~passata~~ ^{lassata}, licet duro certamine, sensit
 Verim. animos ~~Brachia~~, vel trepido corda subacta metû;
~~sed~~ ^{contra} mortem, sibi sumpsit ab ipsâ
 Vita jacturâ, ~~dis~~ ^{dis}tinuitq; diu.

Lugubris sociis voce inclamabat, et illis
 Reddere quæsitam dulce fuisset opem,
 Sed rabies venti non intermissa velabat,
 Et vis sputnosæ non superanda vali.
 Crudeles ergo, ~~quoniam~~ ^{quia} non
 permissum est, rapidâ. præcedere fugâ.
~~non licuit~~, ~~rapta~~ ^{prætercunt} turbata prætercunt.

Quale tamen possunt, et quale furentibus undis
~~auxilium~~ ^{auxilium} reddere dant apacres,
~~præcor~~ ^{præcor} fas est, ~~auxilium~~ ^{auxilium} expedant.

Gallinaria quippe, leõesq; liquoribus haustus,
 In mare projiciunt, nec sine fune, cados.
 Irrita cuncta tamen dederint quocunq; nec illi
~~quæ~~ ^{quæ} terra aut nâvis
~~vel~~ ^{vel} ~~intuitum~~ ^{intuitum} ~~vita~~ ^{vita} spem superasse, sciunt.

Vox nulla ex alto, vel me peruenire vel illo,

Ventis ne fremerent initia iussa dedit,
Lux nulla ex alto, quando petimus utrique
~~Nemo, transmissos pollos componere fluctus,~~
Poli, deserti, fulsit amica Satis,
~~Aquas illi, vel intra stravit aquas,~~

Neutri evasimus ergo; at me fatalior hausit
Vis undæ, et barathrum triste tetrumq; magis.







*The House at East Dereham in which Cowper died.
Drawn and presented to W.U. by Miss E. Turner of Yarmouth.*

Coactus in fauces Averni
Totus atro perii sub amne.

and "To the Reverend Mr. Newton on His Return from Ramsgate" (1780), in which Cowper describes himself as "tempest-toss'd, and wreck'd at last, / Come home to port no more."

In Cowper's world the striving for the mastery was often in a void, in despair. There was no true reassurance, only an expectation of the final dissolution. Every sign of grace was for him a sign of his exclusion from God's mercy. He had committed the unpardonable sin. He was damned. And so he was swallowed alive, in a gulph, like those three, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who were swallowed up by the earth because of the wrath of God. Against Cowper's hymn "Light Shining out of Darkness" ("God moves in a mysterious way") one must put the terrifying Sapphics of 1763:

Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,
Scarce can endure delay of execution,
Wait, with impatient readiness, to seize my
Soul in a moment.

In his poetry and in his letters we watch Cowper's hideous foes destroy the walls around the world enclosed in his garden. Even his most gentle and delicate pictures of the animals in that garden are outlined against a background of imminent danger. This is true, for example, of that perfectly chiseled lyric, "The Snail," probably written within a few weeks of "The Cast-away." It begins:

To grass, or leaf, or fruit, or wall,
The snail sticks close, nor fears to fall,
As if he grew there, house and all
Together.

Within that house secure he hides,
When danger imminent betides
Of storm, or other harm besides
Of weather.

If the snail finds security and serenity, the poet himself is trapped and devoured by insanity. This is what we feel as "The Cast-away" ends. The simple stanza bears its burden until in calmness and in quiet we are overwhelmed by the final gulph. It is a madness which is constantly about to break, and which is more awful than any sea or any death. After that there is only Cowper's last cry on the night he died, "What can it signify?"

In "The Cast-away" there is an extended comparison of Cowper's own situation with the story of a seaman told in Richard Walter's *A Voyage Round the World . . . by George Anson* (1748). On March 24, 1741, while rounding Cape Horn in a storm, Walter wrote that "one of our ablest seaman [*sic*] was canted over-board; and notwithstanding the prodigious agitation of the waves, we perceived that he swam very strong, and it was with the utmost concern that we found ourselves incapable of assisting him; and we were the more grieved at his unhappy fate since we lost sight of him struggling with the waves, and conceived from the manner in which he swam, that he might continue sensible for a considerable time longer, of the horror attending his irretrievable situation" (Book I, chapter 8). The incident was recollected by Cowper many years after reading Walter's book. According to the Reverend John Johnson, a grandson of Cowper's maternal uncle, Roger Donne, Cowper began and finished "The Cast-away" on March 20, 1799. The opening of the manuscript is dated March 20; the end—presumably when Cowper wrote out the poem—March 25. It was translated into Latin by him about August 26, 1799. The verses were written at East Dereham, Norfolk, where he had been living with Johnson since the autumn of 1796, and where he died on April 25, 1800, and was buried.

The manuscript of "The Cast-away" was part of the well-known collection of Cowper's poems and epigrams in Latin and English, in his autograph, written from the spring of 1799 until the winter of 1800. These, "The Norfolk MSS."—they are so described on the cover—were his last poems: translations from

the Greek, from Vergil, from Vincent Bourne, from Gay's *Fables* into Latin, and two of his own poems, "Montes Glaciales" (and a translation into English) and "The Cast-away" (with Latin translation). "The Cast-away" was his last original poem. "The Norfolk MSS." were presumably given by John Johnson to Lady Hesketh, Cowper's cousin, after the poet's death. She in turn sent the volume to William Hayley in January 1801, and he published "The Cast-away" for the first time in his *Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper, Esqr.*, Chichester, 1803, Volume II, pages 214-217.

"The Norfolk MSS." remained among Hayley's papers long after his death in 1820, and were finally sold at Sotheby's, May 20-22, 1878, as part of the Hayley correspondence (lot 123, which brought with lot 122—a manuscript essay on Cowper by A. Knox, 1802—two shillings). The manuscripts were later in the collection of Joseph Mayer (1803-1886) of Liverpool. In 1920 they were sold at auction in Philadelphia (Stan. V. Henkels, January 16—\$325) and New York (American Art Association, December 20—\$110). The sale records have not all been traced, except from February 26, 1925, when the volume was bought by G. Michelmores, the London dealer, at Hodgson's (for £60). "The Norfolk MSS." were repeatedly listed in the catalogues of G. Michelmores and Co., but were not sold. In April 1938, on one of several occasions when Michelmores put them up for sale at Sotheby's, Professor Neilson Campbell Hannay tried to buy them through Maggs Bros. He was not successful, for Michelmores had reserved them well, and the manuscripts, which he had offered in his own catalogues at £300 (except during the lean years of the 1930's—£120), were bought in at £62. In 1952 Michelmores told Professor Hannay that he might have "The Norfolk MSS." for £120. The offer was not accepted. On June 14, 1955, the manuscripts were sold at Sotheby's, owing to the closing of Michelmores's business. Professor Hannay directed Maggs Bros. to obtain the collection, which they did, at £125.

Professor Hannay did not then, however, get the manuscript

of "The Cast-away." Sometime before 1925 "The Norfolk MSS." were unbound, and several leaves were removed. Only ten leaves, folded to form four pages each, remained (numbered 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13). Number 2 was "The Cast-away" with, it would seem (for they were separated), a translation of one of Vincent Bourne's poems, "Reciprocal Kindness the Primary Law of Nature." These two poems were bought by Professor Hannay in May 1956 from the Carnegie Book Shop, New York. The present location of leaves 6 and 11 is not known. In September 1962, shortly after Professor Hannay's death, the manuscript of "The Cast-away" and the other pages of "The Norfolk MSS." were acquired by the Princeton University Library as a part of the large collection of Cowperian manuscripts formed by him. This collection was a gift to the Library from Mr. Robert H. Taylor.

Transcripts of "The Cast-away" and Cowper's translation into Latin follow. The Latin verses have not previously been printed.

The Cast-away.

Mar. 20. 1799.

Obscurest night involved the sky,
Th' Atlantic billows roar'd,
When such a destin'd wretch as I
Wash'd headlong from on board
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home for ever left.

No braver Chief could Albion boast
Than He with whom he went,
Nor ever ship left Albions coast
With warmer wishes sent,
He loved them both, but both in vain,
Nor Him beheld, nor Her again.

Not long beneath the whelming brine
Expert to swim, he lay,
Nor soon he felt his strength decline
Or courage die away;
But waged with Death a lasting strife
Supported by despair of life.

He shouted, nor his friends had fail'd
To check the vessels' course,
But so the furious blast prevail'd
That, pitiless perforce,
They left their outcast mate behind,
And scudded still before the wind.

Some succour yet they could afford,
And, such as storms allow,
The cask, the coop, the floated cord
Delay'd not to bestow;
But He, they knew, nor ship nor shore,
Whate'er they gave, should visit more.

Nor, cruel as it seem'd, could He
Their haste, himself, condemn,
Aware that flight in such a sea
Alone could rescue *them*;
Yet bitter felt it still to die
Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

He long survives who lives an hour
In ocean, self-upheld,
And so long he with unspent pow'r
His destiny repell'd,
And ever, as the minutes flew,
Entreated help, or cried, Adieu!

At length, his transient respite past,
His comrades, who before
Had heard his voice in ev'ry blast,
Could catch the sound no more;
For then, by toil subdued, he drank
The stifling wave, and then he sank.

No poet wept him, but the page
Of narrative sincere
That tells his name, his worth, his age,
Is wet with Anson's tear,
And tears by bards or heroes shed
Alike immortalize the Dead.

I, therefore, purpose not or dream,
 Descanting on his fate,
To give the melancholy theme
 A more enduring date,
But mis'ry still delights to trace
Its semblance in anothers' case.

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
 No light propitious shone,
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
 We perish'd, each, alone;
But I, beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he.

Mar. 25.

NOTE: *In the sixth stanza, line 5, deserted was first written for die.*

The Latin translation given here follows Cowper's manuscript as closely as possible. The accent marks and eccentricities of punctuation are those of the original, so far as can be determined, but the abbreviated "que" endings have been written out. Deleted words are described in the notes. Professor Torry James Luce, Jr., of the Department of Classics, Princeton University, helped with the reading of difficult passages.

Totum velabat nox obscurissima cælum,
Et mare Atlantæum dira ciebat hyems,
Cum miser in medios excussus navita fluctûs
(Sorte quidè̃m tristi, sed levioꝛe meâ)
5 Spem reditûs horæ momento perdidit omnem,
Privatus sociis, veliferâque domo.

Nunquam ex Angliacis solvit dux fortioꝛ oris
Quàm cui se socium junxerat ille lubens;
Nec votis unquàm misêre in bella carinam
10 Pluribus Angligenæ, solicitisve magis;
Ille ducemque suum et navem dilexit, at illi
Neutrum oculis ultrâ cernere posse datum est.

At non vesanis sub fluctibus, arte natandi
Instructus, longûm defuit ille sibi;
15 Nec lassata, licet duro certamine, sensit
Brachia, vel trepido corda subacta metû;
Verûm animos contrâ mortem sibi sumpsit ab ipsâ
Vitæ jacturâ, distinuitque diû.

Lugubri sociis voce inclamabat, et illis
20 Reddere quæsitam dulce fuisset opem,
Sed rabies venti non intermissa vetabat,
Et vis spumosi non superanda sali.
Crudeles ergò, quia non clementibus esse
Permissum est, rapidâ præteriere fugâ.

25 Quale tamen possunt, et quale furentibus undis
Auxilium fas est, reddere dant alacres,
Gallinaria quippe, levesque, liquoribus haustis,
In mare projiciunt, nec sine fune, cados.
Irrita cuncta tamèn, dederint quæcunque, nec illi
30 Aut terræ aut navis spem superesse, sciunt.

Sævum ipsis fugisse videtur; non tamen audet
Sævitiæ socios insimulare suos,
Ipsis novit enim nullam restare salutem
Ni quò tempestas effera raptet, eant,
35 Quo vero auxilium propius videatur, eo plus
Infelix durum percipit esse mori.

Non citò vir moritur, mediis qui fluctibus horam
Absumit, solus, sufficiensque sibi;
Nec citiùs lapsis animis et viribus ille
40 Imperio Fati paruit et periit, —
Nec citiùs cessavit opem efflagitare, vel altâ
Et crebrâ effari voce, Valetate mei!

Elapsâ verò, quæ curta superfuit, horâ,
Arrectis starent auribus usque licet,
45 Clamores nullos socii audivere; repente
Cessârunt gemitûs, obticuere preces.
Tunc etenim vasto siluit sub gurgite mersus,
Et diras patulis rictibus hausit aquas.

Nullis hic vatum lacrymis inclaruit; ingens
50 Huic decus Ansoni pagina sola dedit;
Ille virum plorans fidum sibi, suave reliquit
Indicium quantò dignus honoris erat.
Quemque Heros fletû dignatur, vix minus ille
Laudis habet, quam quem Pieris ipsa dolet.

55 Ergo fata hominis tam tristia non ego chordis
 Curavi demens associare meis
 Ut fiat res nota celebrior, utque suspersit
 Omne quod in seculum non superesse nequit,
 Sed quoniam cognata suis mala sorte alienâ
 60 Visa, aliquæ miseris esse medela solent.

Vox nulla ex alto, vel me pereunte vel illo,
 Ventis ne fremerent mitia jussa dedit,
 Lux nulla ex alto, quando periimus utrique
 Soli, deserti, fulsit amica satis;
 65 Neutri evasimus ergò; at me fatalior hausit
 Vis undæ, et barathrum triste tetrumque magis.

LINE

2. *Nearly indecipherable writing before the line; perhaps Totum and Velabat, the latter written over the former, and then both deleted*
12. *ultrâ] iterum deleted*
15. *Following Nec] duro quamvis certamine brachia deleted*
17. *Verum animos] Sed vires deleted*
18. *distinuitque] Prefix sus[?] deleted*
23. *quia non] quoniam deleted*
24. *Original line: Non licuit, rapti turbine prætereunt.*
26. *Auxilium] Præberi deleted; reddere dant alacres,] auxilium, expediunt. deleted*
30. *Aut terræ aut navis] Vel minimam[?] vitæ deleted*
43. *Elapsâ] Tum deleted; following verò,] volucris cum tandem effugerat hora, deleted; also elapsâ deleted above volucris*
57. *Plural form, supersint, written originally by mistake*
58. *Apparently Cowper wrote In pluros annos non superesse nequit, After that Aevo quod nulli in tempus Then began Omne before Aevo. . . . Finally, the line as printed above*
63. *Original line: Nemo tumescentes pollens componere fluctûs,*
64. *Original line: Aequoreas illi, vel mihi stravit aquas,*



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